STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Young People Lead Protest at Berkeley City Hall

Youth made the strongest impression at the protest. It was their message of compassion, their plea for justice, expressed so beautifully with their prayer flags.

by Lydia Gans and Terry Messman

Young people painted colorful prayer flags and displayed them at City Hall in a public appeal for compassion. Lydia Gans photo

The mainstream media may be ignoring them, but homeless activists and providers of services for homeless youth and adults are making sure that Mayor Tom Bates and the Berkeley City Council are paying attention. The threat that Berkeley officials might pass a law prohibiting sitting on the city streets has mobilized a broad coalition of organizations to express opposition to it.

On Tuesday, June 7, another spirited demonstration was held at the Berkeley City Hall, organized by the Stand Up For The Right To Sit Down coalition. A number of young people who have experienced homelessness joined with organizers in explaining the inhumanity of the idea and pointing out the paucity of services for homeless youth in the city.

The power of political protest

The publicity and highly visible protests organized by the coalition have already had a major impact. By mid-June, it became evident that the mayor and City Council were beginning to back off from their previous plans for the council to enact a sitting ban ordinance.

It now appears that the coalition has made it too politically costly for the City Council to pass such an ordinance. The council has evidently felt compelled to drop their plans to push through an anti-sitting ordinance in the summer months.

They may drop it entirely now, or they may try to place it as a future ballot measure. That way, individual council members can avoid the political costs of supporting such a controversial measure, and leave it up to the voting public to bear responsibility.

On June 15, the *Berkeley Daily Planet* reported that one of the sitting ban's chief proponents, Craig Becker, owner of the Caffe Mediterraneum and an influential member of the Telegraph Business Improvement District, has conceded that "the proposal is in limbo for now."

The coalition's protests and publicity are undoubtedly the reason that the sitting ban proposal has been pushed down into limbo. Homeless activists have scored at least a temporary triumph over a seemingly unstoppable proposal backed by mayor Tom Bates, several members of the City Council and some of the most powerful business organizations in Berkeley

Young people fight City Hall

At the June 7 protest, scores of people gathered at Berkeley City Hall. They held up signs bearing the message of the organizing coalition, Stand Up For The Right To Sit Down. One man held a sign stating satirically, "9 out of 10 violent crimes are committed by someone standing."

Dozens of hand-painted prayer flags were on display. Young people from Youth Spirit Artworks were serving food and stringing together prayer flags that were later held by the people who gathered to

See **Youth Lead Protest at City Hall** *page 8*

Oakland Coalition Fights State's Draconian Cutbacks

"These cuts hurt our families, they hurt our children, they hurt our most needy."
— Laurie Jones, Social Services director

by Terry Messman

BOSS Director boona cheema *(at center with microphone)* addresses the Oakland protest she helped organize. Lydia Gans photo

On July 1, a high-spirited group of protesters arrived at the Alameda County Social Services building in Oakland to protest damaging cuts to the safety net that began taking effect that very day. A broad coalition of childcare agencies, senior organizations, homeless advocates, and healthcare groups denounced what they said were inhumane and destructive cuts to medical care, education, disability services and family welfare benefits.

The far-reaching cutbacks in SSI benefits, CalWORKs family benefits, senior health centers, and Medi-Cal were approved by the California state legislature in March and took effect on July 1, the same day as the Oakland protest.

A protest rally in front of the Oakland welfare offices might typically include a condemnation of the county welfare officials inside the building, but this was a protest with a significant difference.

In the middle of the rally, Luan Huynh, a supervising attorney with the East Bay Community Law Center and one of the protest's key organizers, suddenly made an unexpected announcement. Huynh introduced Laurie Jones, the new director of the Alameda County Social Services Agency, saying, "she wanted to be here today because I think she supports us!"

That turned out to be exactly right. Laurie Jones spoke powerfully in favor of the protest, eliciting enthusiastic cheers from more than 100 demonstrators who had been chanting loudly outside her offices.

Jones told the rally, "I wanted to make sure that you were aware that Social Services is completely on board and supportive of the advocates in the community. These cuts hurt our families, they hurt our communities, they hurt our children, they hurt our most needy."

See **Oakland Protest of State Budget** *page 7*

Helping Homeless, Jobless Veterans in Oakland

by Maureen Hartmann

Alex McElree, founding director of Operation Dignity, an organization that provides emergency and transitional housing to homeless veterans in Oakland, is a tall, heavyset man with sandy hair. He speaks in simple, unadorned sentences, but his words and demeanor convey a personality full of strong emotion and action.

After completing three tours of duty in Vietnam, McElree returned home, only to find himself inducted into another army, joining the countless, nameless ranks of homeless veterans living on the streets of American cities. McElree's experiences led him to found Operation Dignity.

He says, "What happened to me was, because of drinking and using drugs after returning from Vietnam in 1969, I held jobs, lost jobs. Eventually I got married; my wife decided to leave. I lost my job and I had a nervous breakdown in 1991. While I was being treated for my stress condition by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, I found out how many veterans were homeless — 32 percent of all single homeless people are veterans.

"While I was being treated, I found a friendly landlord who rented to me a house cheaply and I went out and found some beds and mattresses, and took in homeless veterans during that time of my own recovery. I think it helped me more than it helped them. Along the way, I hoped it helped them.

"The founding of the organization was difficult because the system at the time in Alameda County was and is very hard to break into. If we didn't have money, they were not going to help us. For two to three years, I did it with my own money, my Social Security. Then in 1994, I was able to get a grant from VA with a lot of people thinking I was not going to be able to do it. Julie Angelone, the director of the Veterans' Grant and Perdiem Program in San Francisco, which has in the meantime spread to Oakland, helped me start Operation Dignity. The VA staff helped me write the grant application."

A homeless man in military gear. Many veterans return from overseas only to end up homeless at home. Robert L. Terrell photo

One of McElree's first helpers was Bill Kennedy, a veteran like himself. McElree says that a number of veterans stayed on after being helped to recovery, to become full-time volunteer staff in the outfit.

Because of Kennedy's alcoholism and addiction, he had come to the end of indoor places to stay in, including shelters and detox centers. Even Kennedy's mother had moved him out after a stay with her.

He finally appeared one morning on McElree's doorstep. From then on, he has remained clean and sober. Kennedy is now a building inspector. He worked for McElree as his "second-in-command" originally. As McElree opened new sites for veterans, he would direct them.

Another story, this time of a woman veteran who recovered from her war wounds with Operation Dignity's aid and helps others through example, is very touching and inspiring. McElree met her when she was staying with her two children in a shelter that he directed.

She moved into the transitional housing that he ran, and stayed the limit set by the Veterans' Affairs Grant and Perdiem Program, two years. The housing staff helped her get a job.

"She finally got a permanent place to live," says McElree. "Since then she's bought her own home. She now works for the Department of Veterans' Affairs. She's on my board of directors. She comes and shares with women veterans what happened to her, so they know there's some hope for them."

Clients usually spend 21 days in emergency housing. Recently, there has been no emergency housing program except for "some motel vouchers, so that we can put a family, or someone that's medically frail, in a motel," says McElree. "At this time I do not offer an emergency shelter, not that I wouldn't like to. The city doesn't have one that's open year round."

If everything works out, the homeless veterans then move into transitional housing. "At the end of the two years, our goal is to have them in permanent housing — have them working or on Social Security, or whatever they need to be on, so that they can have enough money to live and be self-sufficient."

It is necessary to have some "good neighbor" rules due to the close community living, such as not playing music too loudly. McElree adds, "No fighting, no physical violence; don't disrupt the program for others..."

Women are housed apart from men, so that they don't have to mix with the men if they don't want to, some having suf-

See **Helping Homeless Veterans** *page 6*

Bring 'em Home

Does our government "support the troops" as it cuts their benefits and turns its back on the casualties of the war? Does the government "support the troops" as it casts countless veterans onto the streets?

by Judy Andreas

On Friday, April 15, 2005, I stood in front of our local courthouse protesting the War in Iraq. It was tax day and we were trying to make a point about how our tax dollars were being used.

Many cars passed by and gave us an approving honk. Other drivers gave us a disapproving third finger. Some of the cars had "support our troops" proudly displayed on their bumpers. It might have been 2005, but it seems like only yesterday.

Has anything changed? "Support our troops?" Does anyone question those words when they mindlessly slap the bright yellow sticker on their vehicle?

I'm thinking back on that day of protest, because it was back in 2005 that our small county had its first fatality in Iraq. His name was Army Spc. Manny Lopez. After the tragedy hit the newspaper, grief-stricken people called the local radio station to give voice to their pain.

One woman uttered, through her tears, "He died for our freedom."

He died for our freedom? I wish someone would help me understand how killing innocent people in the Middle East is keeping us free. What has sending soldiers to be poisoned and to die have to do with our freedom? In my lexicon of logic, the belief that "he died for our freedom," is just about as meaningless as "support our troops."

On that particular tax day, we carried signs in front of the courthouse. I chose a sign that featured a picture of an Iraqi veteran named Herold Noel. Unlike Manny Lopez, Noel came home from the war. In fact, he came home a hero — but it was not long before he wound up homeless.

Byron Pitts of CBS News did a report on Herold Noel on March 25, 2005.

When "Iraqi Freedom" first began, Private First Class Noel was a soldier in the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division, pounding a path into Baghdad. "I fought for this country," Noel said. "I shed blood for this country. I watched friends die."

Noel was forced to live in his jeep after being robbed at a homeless shelter. He put in applications for housing but was told they were lost.

Pitts' report talked about how veterans are coming home with mental health issues and substance abuse problems.

"Mental health issues?" Once again I am going to have to admit ignorance. That phrase is amorphous and ambiguous. I cannot help but wonder how many of these "mental health issues" are manifestations of depleted uranium.

Leuren Moret is a geoscientist who has worked around the world on radiation issues, educating citizens, the media, members of parliaments and Congress and other officials. Ms. Moret calls depleted uranium a death sentence. "Depleted uranium: Dirty bombs, dirty missiles, dirty bullets: A death sentence here and abroad."

A Japanese professor, Dr. K. Yagasaki, has calculated that 800 tons of depleted uranium (DU) is the atomicity equivalent of 83,000 Nagasaki bombs. The United States has used more DU since 1991 than the atomicity equivalent of 400,000 Nagasaki bombs. We have released 10 times the amount of radiation released into the atmosphere from atmospheric testing!

No wonder our soldiers, their families and the people of the Middle East, Yugoslavia and Central Asia are sick.

"The long-term effects have revealed that DU (uranium oxide) is a virtual death sentence," stated Arthur N. Bernklau, executive director of Veterans for Constitutional Law in New York.

"Marion Fulk, a nuclear physical chemist, who retired from the Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Weapons Lab, and was also involved with the Manhattan Project, interprets the new and rapid malignancies in the soldiers (from the 2003 Iraq War) as 'spectacular — and a matter of concern!'"

Noel was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. Unemployed and married with three kids, he couldn't get a job.

Waking people up from the nightmare is not easy. While the people busily "support the troops" what does the government do? Does our government "support the troops" as it cuts their benefits?

Does the government "support our troops" when it sends them into battle with inadequate equipment? Does the government "support the troops" when it turns its back on the casualties of the war? Does the government "support the troops" as it casts Herold Noel and countless others onto the streets?

Not long ago I watched a powerful movie called "Homeless to Harvard," based on the true story of a young girl, Liz Murray, whose parents were drug addicts dying of AIDS. After dropping out of school and living on the street, this heroic young woman became determined to get an education.

Though she ate out of dumpsters and slept on the subway, she ultimately finished high school in two years and got a *New York Times* scholarship to Harvard University. It was a deeply moving story. It was a story filled with hope. And yet, it was obviously unique. Most young people in Liz's situation succumb to a life of hopelessness.

This year, I once again stood in front of our local courthouse protesting war. Yet, in my case, the protest was aimed at all the wars — past, present and future. My protest was aimed at the abuse of people all around the globe. My protest was aimed at the lies and deception and greed of the globalists and the sadly hypnotized populace that is willing to kill and be killed without knowing why.

I carried a sign that had a picture of Noel. The sign read "From Hero to Homeless." It was a story filled with despair. Sadly, Noel's story, unlike Liz's, is not unique. As many as 275,000 veterans will likely sleep out in the cold tonight.

AARP Sells Out the Elderly, Poor and Disabled

The poverty industry flourishes as budget cuts shred the safety net

by Lynda Carson

Oakland — Letters were sent in June advising more than 1.3 million elderly and disabled people on SSI (Supplemental Security Income) throughout California that on July 1, they will receive less funding to cover their needs. They have had their benefits slashed to less than the federal poverty level, due to another vicious round of state budget cuts by the Democrats and Republicans.

SSI recipients will now receive only $9,960 annually — $930 less than the estimated annual federal poverty level. As a result, countless elderly and disabled people are facing dire poverty consequences on a level not seen in years.

Reverend Ben Fulcher, Sr. of Oakland receives disability payments from SSI and said, "The effect of the ongoing budget cuts may result in more displaced citizens on the streets. We have had over $90 cut per month in assistance out of the SSI disability program in California during the last 18 months or so, and it's pretty devastating in total. People now have to choose between paying for food or their rent."

Oakland SSI recipient Naja Strand said, "I know damn well they are not spending our tax dollars right. We have to cut back on military spending and give back more money for the schools, and public education."

The latest round of budget cuts have left poor people feeling deprived, as their income decreases while rents keep skyrocketing, resulting in less money for food, health care, transportation and keeping the lights turned on in their homes.

Meanwhile, as the poor continue to be devastated by never-ending budget cuts shredding the safety net, the poverty industry in Oakland and across the nation flourishes for key staff in the nonprofit sector, in ways that some advocates charge are exploiting the poor.

The huge salary increases for many high-level employees in the poverty industry have accelerated during the same period that massive budget cuts to local, state and federal programs have taken place all across the nation.

DOUBLE-CROSSING THE POOR

On June 17, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) made national headlines after it double-crossed the elderly poor, and sold out women and children across the nation, by joining right-wing Republicans and Democrats in supporting budget cuts to Social Security benefits.

While SSI disability recipients in California will now only receive $9,960 annually, many employees in AARP are paid $300,000 annually and more. The shocking income gap between poor people living on SSI and the upper echelons of the nonprofit sector have reached unacceptable — even obscene — levels.

AARP's policy chief John C. Rother was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 17, saying that AARP was dropping its longtime opposition to cutting Social Security benefits, a position that will deprive the poor of badly needed income.

Art by Christa Occhiogrosso

In 2009, Rother was paid $290,089 in salary, plus $40,269 in other compensation by AARP, and may have lost touch with the poor. Many supporters of Social Security now believe that Rother opened up the door for conservatives and right-wing crusaders to solidify their ongoing attack on Social Security.

With offices in California and members in Oakland and Alameda County, AARP is a wealthy, billion-dollar corporation with nonprofit status and 37 million U.S. members. AARP generated $2,182,262,128 in gross receipts during 2009.

AARP claims that its mission is to enhance the quality of life for the aged, with emphasis on those at greatest social and economic risk. In reality, those that benefit the most from AARP's activities are the top employees of the nonprofit organization who are raking in a small fortune in salaries and compensation.

HIGH SALARIES OF AARP EXECS

In 2009, Robert R. Hagans Jr., chief financial officer of AARP, received $317,324 in salary, plus $46,703 in other compensation. Thomas C. Nelson, chief operating officer, was paid $492,320 in salary, plus $48,609 in compensation.

Other high-ranking AARP employees received comparable salaries:

Nancy LeaMond: $343,656 in salary, plus $39,453 in other compensation.

Emilio Pardo: $326,639 in salary, $46,184 in compensation.

Joan S. Wise: $325,690 in salary, $42,360 in compensation.

James Laney: $325,962 in salary, $12,411 in compensation.

Shereen G. Remez: $300,429 in salary, $38,805 in compensation.

Kevin J. Donnellan: $278,707 in salary, $40,955 in compensation.

Ellen Hollander: $261,546 in salary, $48,599 in compensation.

Harroll Backus: $258,828 in salary, plus $38,751 in compensation.

POVERTY INDUSTRY — EAST BAY

In Oakland, 990 tax filings also reveal that salaries and compensation have been steadily rising in the nonprofit affordable housing sector. One example is the income received by key employees of the Oakland-based, housing organization, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC).

EBALDC claims that its mission is to develop affordable housing for low-income people and integrated services, with an emphasis on Asian and Pacific Islander communities and the diverse low-income populations of the East Bay.

Records show that in 2009, EBALDC Executive Director Lynette Lee earned $140,536, plus an additional $5,942 in other compensation. Records also reveal that in FY 2007-2008, EBALDC only paid Lee $87,265, meaning that Lee's compensation from EBALDC skyrocketed by more than $50,000 in a single year. Since then, Lee has retired and been replaced as executive director by Jeremy Liu.

EBALDC Human Resources Director La Netha Oliver earned $80,221 in 2009, plus $8,184 in other compensation. Yet in the previous year, she only earned $68,547, meaning that her salary increased by about $18,000 in a year.

In 2009, Carlos Castellanos, director of real estate development for EBALDC, earned $91,280, plus $11,228 in other compensation, a substantial salary hike of about $28,000 over the previous year.

EBALDC Chief Financial Officer Don Piyathaisere earned $98,265, plus an additional $8,472 in other compensation in 2009. Mary Hennessy, chief operations officer for EBALDC, raked in $129,220 in 2009, and Charise Fong, director of economic development, received $81,828.

These high salaries in the poverty industry are becoming the standard among other so-called nonprofit housing developers in the East Bay. Records show comparably high salary levels for the top employees of Eden Housing, Satellite Housing, Resources for Community Development, Affordable Housing Associates, EAH Housing and Bridge Housing.

These exorbitant salaries inflate the cost of producing low-income housing in a time when there is a serious nationwide shortage of affordable housing. Many housing advocates are beginning to ask how many more housing units could be built if salaries weren't so shockingly high in the so-called nonprofit sector.

How many poor people are not being housed due to these high compensation levels? How many rent increases must be endured by poor tenants in order to keep nonprofit executives living in luxury?

Lynda Carson may be reached at tenantsrule@yahoo.com

Street Elder: Morning

Claire J. Baker

Her first steps are a stagger-limp —
a block, a mile to go!
On the grimy street stage,
she still tries to play a part,
mutters moving lines
but few hear them at all
or hear them as true.
Maybe the one
dear-hearted today
is you...

Looking for Fathers

by George Wynn

Walking aimlessly down
Tenderloin streets
homeless, wifeless, jobless
walking slowly as though
they never get enough sleep
they plop down spread-eagled
to the sky and snore the day away

Some of them have law degrees
and medals and were cross-country
truckers and have children
they haven't seen in 13 or 15 years
who are searching for their fathers
on the lonely streets of America

We Wobble Forth

by Sue Ellen Pector

America shames us
as though the wound of failure
were insufficient torture.
We wobble forth despite
America's taunting.

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South of Silicon Valley, Hunger Haunts Hollister

In a great contradiction in U.S. poverty, workers who spend their lives producing the food consumed by millions often don't have enough to eat themselves.

Volunteers of the San Benito County Community Food Bank in Hollister, Calif., hand out groceries at the Migrant Labor Camp.

Story and photos by David Bacon

Hollister, Calif. — Every year when the spring comes, families get in their big pickup trucks in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, or the Salt River Valley in Arizona, and head for Hollister, south of Silicon Valley. Generations of families have made the annual migration to get jobs in the San Benito Foods cannery, or in the local fields on the machines harvesting the tomatoes that get canned there.

This year, according to brothers Harley and Emillio Delgado, work has been really slow. "Last week we were picking apricots," Harley says. "It's the weather — it's been raining a lot, and not really warm." The two live in the migrant worker camp, set up just south of town in the 1940s to house the field labor needed by local ranchers. Today, part of the camp consists of trailers, and another part buildings built after the war.

Every Saturday, Israel Banuelos pulls his truck out of a parking lot on the other side of Hollister, behind the warehouse that houses the county food bank. The truck is filled with bags of food, and the camp is his first stop. The Delgado brothers are among the many that line up while Banuelos and helper Erik Rivera hand out bags of food.

In one of the great contradictions of U.S. poverty, people who spend their working lives producing the food consumed by millions in cities all over the country often don't have enough to eat themselves.

Here at the migrant camp, farm workers and cannery workers need the truck's food partly because work is slow.

"But even when there's more work, there are still lots of families here waiting for bags of food," Banuelos says, "sometimes more than there are today. People really need it. I don't know what they'd do if we didn't come every week. I feel I'm doing something important, helping them to survive."

San Benito County is just south of Silicon Valley. As you drive south, the big electronics plants and the sprawling developments that house their workers gradually disappear. In their place spread fields of lettuce and tomatoes, and orchards of apricots and walnuts.

Something else changes too.

As communities become more rural, and farm workers make up more of the population, people get poorer. In 2009, the average yearly income in Santa Clara County — home of Silicon Valley — was $94,715. Silicon Valley has its own not-so-hidden poverty, but the urban standard of living, especially in the country's premier high-tech industrial center, is much higher than San Benito County. Here the average wage in 2009 was a third of Silicon Valley — $37,623.

In April last year, when the recession boosted state unemployment to 12 percent, Santa Clara's rate was 10.3 percent. San Benito County's unemployment rate was exactly double — 20.6 percent.

When the San Benito County Community Food Bank opened 20 years ago as the Community Pantry, it served 35 families. Last year, it handed out 1750 bags a week to over 5000 people. Half of them are children, many from families who work in the fields.

After the food bank truck leaves the migrant camp, it heads back towards town, to the Rancho Apartments. These subsidized homes were built in the wake of the political changes brought by the farm worker movement of the 1960s and '70s.

During those years, at the height of the United Farm Workers movement, Hollister was a union stronghold. Jose Luna (known in English as Joe Moon), was a short, unassuming farm worker who became one of the union's best organizers.

A UNION RUN BY WORKERS

Luna came to Hollister in the late 1960s, and organized the thousand grape pickers at what was then one of the largest wine companies in the world — Almaden Vineyards. When Luna left, his legacy wasn't just a contract, but a union the workers ran themselves.

Every September when the grape harvest started in the fields of Paicines, a half-hour south, hundreds of men and women would descend on the tiny union office in Hollister. There the ranch committee, usually headed by Roberto San Roman, would dispatch workers to the fields.

The office was run by the workers. The union contract boosted piece rates. A family working the nine-week season at Almaden could earn enough to get back to Texas or Arizona, and make it through winter's dead time until the following spring.

Today the vineyards at Paicines are as extensive as ever, but Almaden Vineyards is hardly a memory. The company disappeared in the 1980s. In the place of the union hall, labor contractors hire workers for the harvest. Piece rates have dropped.

Most farm workers today were small children when the union office closed. A few older men getting bags of food at the truck in the migrant camp, like Julio Cervantes or Jose Manzo, are old enough to remember. But most do not.

And while the upsurge in Latino power that the union started is responsible for the housing in places like the Rancho Apartments, the young people who collect the bags of food out in front have no way to remember that. The food bank worries about those kids.

"When youngsters have just noodles, bread or crackers to eat for dinner, as many here do, they cannot perform well in school," its website says. "This is how many families in poverty must live today, relying on carbohydrate-based food that's filling but very low in nutrition."

The bags of food on the truck have bread, and even muffins, but they also have lettuce, oranges and food that won't cause as much child obesity.

The Food Bank provides food to more than 5,000 residents, half of them children.

After Banuelos' truck is empty, he drives it back to the warehouse.

In the afternoon, the truck goes out again, this time to find the homeless people living under the trees near the railroad tracks, on a hill overlooking downtown.

The old men who get their bags there are not from farm worker families. Their conversation as they wait for food reveals a different slice of San Benito County's working-class history.

Peewee Rabello, Sr. is one of the first in line. "My son Manuel," he declares, "drives a big rig truck, and his son, who's also named Manuel, just started driving one too. We've had ten generations of Manuels in our family. They've all been truck drivers. I have a picture of my great-great-grandfather — I forget how many greats there are — next to one of the first Model-T trucks, with a flatbed on the back."

In addition to driving trucks, Rabello's family also worked in what was the county's main enterprise for many years — its mine. So did the family of Gene Castro, Rabello's friend who stands behind him in the food bag line. The New Idria Quicksilver Mining Company operated the country's second-largest mercury mine in New Idria for a hundred years, finally closing it in 1972. When it was going strong, it employed hundreds of miners.

"My great-great-grandmother was blind," Rabello remembers, "but she worked at the mine as a cook and washed the miners' clothes. I'm amazed she could do all that, but in those days, it was the only way she could support herself. When I was a little boy, she'd hold my hand and help me cross the road. I was never afraid. She could tell when there were cars coming, I guess by hearing them."

Today the mine is a ghost town in the hills south of Paicines, between the Salinas and San Joaquin Valleys. Half its abandoned buildings burned to the ground a few years ago. It is on the EPA Superfund list because mercury-laden water from the closed shafts seeps into the San Carlos Creek, and from there into the San Joaquin River and San Francisco Bay. In addition, rocks at New Idria contain lots of short-fiber asbestos.

The Rabello and Castro families, like those of other miners, must have suffered a great deal of illness over those 100 years. Mercury is a poison, and causes Minimata disease and other forms of nerve damage. Workers who come into contact with asbestos often contract mesothelioma, a painful and fatal form of lung cancer.

Now, descendents of mining families, like Peewee and Gene, have no homes, no jobs, and often, not enough to eat. When the food bank truck comes out every Saturday, they depend on the bags it carries to make it through the next week.

Rabello is not a passive food recipient, though. He opens his wallet, and pulls out one carefully folded letter after another. In tiny, dense text, each demands that Congressmen and other local officials vote for a national health care program.

"We need some kind of socialized medicine," Rabello says, "so poor people can get it." He knows these are the days of budget cuts, but that doesn't faze him. "I'm going to keep writing," he says, "no matter what."

Out of the same wallet he then pulls the card of the Truckstop Ministries. "I pray for it too," he says.

GLIMPSES OF THE SPIRIT

Mia and the Circle of Kindness

Mia was inspired to offer the same kindness she had seen Dorothy show to her cats. Love begets love in a self-renewing circle of kindness.

A homeless woman cradles her two cats. Many homeless people form deep bonds of affection with the animals who give them so much love. Photo by Lydia Gans

by Terry Messman

Mia Esquivel is one of countless disabled people in California who just suffered a significant setback when her SSI (Supplemental Security Income) was reduced to $830 per month, beginning on July 1.

These cutbacks are a terrible blow to poor people already living on the thin margin of survival. Every state official responsible for shredding this lifeline should be forced to live with a poor family for six months to see how badly these cuts jeopardize their very ability to survive.

Although these government-ordered cutbacks may take food out of the mouths of the hungry, and take medicine away from sick children, they have not eradicated the kindness and generosity that is one of the most remarkable character traits of people living in poverty.

When my wife, Ellen Danchik, first met Mia Esquivel 10 years ago, Mia was a disabled mother of two young sons and was living homeless on the streets of Antioch, Calif. She asked Ellen, at that time the housing coordinator for eastern Contra Costa County, to help her find housing.

Mia not only was homeless but also had been diagnosed with a psychological disability. Her sons were living with their grandparents. Ellen was able to hook Mia up with an innovative case management program, and then found her a Section 8 subsidized apartment in Antioch.

After finding stable housing, Mia was able to reunite with her kids and have them move into her apartment. She said that the experience of being helped touched something so deeply within her that her life was changed.

Ever since that day, she has repeatedly gone far, far out of her way to help others in need. Because she was helped during one of her darkest hours, she now tries to pass that help along to others.

Recently, Mia discovered a 37-year-old homeless woman named Elizabeth living in her neighborhood with her boyfriend, Daniel. Elizabeth is disabled and ill, and Daniel also suffers from a serious, life-threatening illness. The couple's problems seem so complex and difficult that most people would shy away. But they live in Mia's neighborhood and she could not pass by without helping..

Mia lives on her scant SSI benefits — the benefits that were just cut on July 1 — yet she gives money to the couple regularly. She says she can't just give them a couple dollars because they would still go hungry, so instead she gives them $20 to $30 so they can get a good meal.

Nearly every Saturday, Mia brings the couple a clean set of clothes she buys for them at a thrift store. She buys them medical supplies. Several times, she brought new blankets to the couple because their blankets have been stolen frequently.

Mia recently consulted with Ellen so she could learn how to help the couple get benefits. Mia worries deeply about this couple, and prays they will be all right.

Mia, a single mother living in poverty, is a true neighbor who does more for this couple than entire nonprofit agencies have done. She has so little herself, but is still somehow willing to share with others.

STRIKING GENEROSITY OF THE POOR

Mia's story is not unique. One of the most striking and unexpected qualities noticed by many activists and social workers who work closely with homeless people is the often amazing levels of sharing and altruism they display towards others in need.

It flies in the face of the values hammered into us day and night by our materialistic society. In a nation where wealth is worshipped, and poverty is feared and deplored, society warns us to look after our own self-interest. Big corporations place profits before people, and each individual is taught to be similarly self-centered.

We are trained to idolize wealth, pursue prosperity and put our money in a bank or the stock market, not in the outstretched hands of a person in need. Yet, even in the face of this powerful societal directive to look out after number one, many people still choose to help one another.

When I became involved in organizing with homeless people in Oakland in the 1990s, that was the single most overwhelming lesson I learned. The Oakland Union of the Homeless had a wild and rebellious run of militant housing takeovers and dozens of acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. We took over abandoned office buildings, barricaded ourselves inside, and were arrested while camped out on the rooftops of federal buildings, demanding affordable housing for all.

Those were inspiring actions, but nothing else felt nearly as important as the sense of community and friendship I unexpectedly found in the Homeless Union. Their personal acts of caring and giving came to seem more important to me than all our political actions put together.

I'd never experienced that much human decency anywhere else in my life. For while we were organizing for abstractions such as "economic justice" and "housing for all," I saw a level of mutual support and sharing that could have transformed our profit-worshipping society more profoundly than any of our housing actions.

The members of the Homeless Union constantly helped one another. They would house a friend who had just been evicted, willingly sharing their cramped little hotel room for weeks. Without being asked, they would share their last dollar with a friend who was broke. They insisted that we buy large amounts of food and cook nutritious meals for hundreds of homeless people every time we did a political action, so whether the protest accomplished anything or not, at least hungry people would be fed that day.

I have never forgotten that I learned the best, most humane lessons of my life from homeless people on the streets of East and West Oakland.

STUDIES SHOW ALTRUISM OF THE POOR

I'm not the only one who learned that same lesson. "The poor are more generous than the rich when it comes to giving to good causes," is a typical headline from the *Guardian* newspaper in England, reporting on a study of donors to British charities that "finds that the least well-off give a higher proportion of their income to charity than the wealthy, no matter what their age, class or beliefs."

In a series of experiments in 2010, researchers at UC Berkeley found that "people of lower socioeconomic status are actually more altruistic than those higher on the economic ladder." The finding of a team of UC researchers echoed recent national surveys showing that "lower-income people donate a greater percentage of their income to charity than upper-income people do."

The UC study was conducted in 2010 by a team led by UC doctoral psychology student Paul Piff and was reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Piff reported, "Individuals from lower-class backgrounds are more generous, trusting and helpful toward others. We find that increased altruism among lower-class individuals is caused by their heightened feelings of compassion and concern for the welfare of others."

Yet if a sense of compassion leads poor people to exhibit greater generosity, Piff found that "wealth seems to buffer people from attending to the needs of others."

All of which leads to a meaningful lesson in trans-species compassion, wherein two different species teach us something about overcoming homelessness.

THE KINDNESS OF THE CAT LADY

Mia Esquivel called Ellen one day several years ago, and told her that she had just met an elderly homeless woman at a free meal program in Antioch. Mia was highly upset because the woman, Dorothy Hill, was in her late 70s and yet was forced to live on the street.

Mia arranged to have Ellen meet Dorothy Hill at the meal program. Ellen helped her apply at a housing program for low-income seniors in Pittsburg. Dorothy was accepted and found a new home there.

In helping her, Ellen learned why Dorothy had become homeless in the first place. In the middle of the night, a fire had ignited in the apartment building where Dorothy resided at the time. She had been sleeping soundly, but when the fire started, her cats kept meowing repeatedly and loudly until Dorothy was awakened. Her cats alerted her in time and they all managed to flee the building.

After the narrow escape, she credited her cats with saving her life. Dorothy and both cats were now homeless as a result of the fire. She was so concerned for the cats that had saved her life that she began spending her meager income on a kennel to house her cats, even while she herself remained homeless and destitute.

WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN

Her cats had saved her life, and Dorothy returned their kindness by paying for a home for her cats at a time when she could not afford a home for herself.

Mia, in turn, was so inspired by Dorothy's acts of kindness to her cats that it made her want to help her find a home, so she brought the elderly woman to Ellen in order to help her find housing.

That is how compassion is sometimes passed from one person to another, like a baton in an Olympics relay race. Mia was inspired to demonstrate the same kindness that she saw Dorothy show.

One way to describe the law of karma is: "What goes around, comes around." Love begets love in a self-renewing circle — an unbroken circle of kindness.

One of the musical geniuses of our era, Brian Wilson, brought this truth vividly to life in his song, "This Whole World."

"Late at night I think about the love
of this whole world,
Lots of different people everywhere,
And when I go anywhere
I see love, I see love, I see love."

Another Anti-homeless Ballot Measure? Really?

If the new law designed to criminalize behavior specific to homeless people seems mean-spirited, *it is*.

by Carol Denney

The Berkeley City Council may not have the stomach to pass another anti-homeless law on their own, but they're counting on another creatively named ballot measure to accomplish the task on the grounds of refusing to "enable" people to sit on the sidewalks, thus frittering away days better spent polishing the handle on the big front door.

They're hoping the voting public won't remember that the last anti-homeless ordinance, overturned by a successful citizen referendum signature campaign, was found to be largely unconstitutional.

Large property owners are apparently unembarrassed by the vast amounts of money and time the Berkeley legal department is forced to spend on their behalf trying to carefully tailor ordinances so as to effect only the unwanted humans in a particular area of town without inconveniencing anyone else.

Discriminatory enforcement is counted on to keep the unwanted (homeless) walking and the wanted (shoppers) at peace, shopping without the inconvenience of encountering any visible poverty.

If the new "Elevate the Homeless" law designed to criminalize behavior (sidewalk sitting) specific to homeless people, transients, travelers, and youth seems mean-spirited, *it is*. Tell your city council representative so.

But equally important, tell the directors of the local business improvement districts that the last thing Berkeley's small businesses need is another nationwide campaign about how terrible it is to shop in Berkeley.

The last contentious anti-homeless ballot measure received national media attention, attention which could have been focused on the amazing places to visit and enjoy in Berkeley. Instead, potential travelers and visitors got the usual dose of stories about how the streets are filthy, full of stoners, etc.

It's their job to promote business, after all. But the business improvement directors seem to love to reinvent the wheel. Their faith that another anti-homeless initiative will improve business is more than consistent; it is apparently irresistible to council representatives who ought to know better.

Pick up the phone. We have better things to do as a community than perfect another negative campaign about our failings. And maybe, just maybe, we can work together on practical approaches to very real problems.

Break It to Them Gently

Berkeley will always attract travelers, hitch-hikers, poets, artists, dreamers, and people who aren't sure who they are yet but want to check out any town roaring with creativity and life.

by Carol Denney

The realization will hit any day now. It will be brutal for those who thought they could somehow create Rodeo Drive out of Telegraph Avenue, but the upside is that it will save years of police riots, court costs, and the bewildering schizophrenia of having the richest property owners in town kill off tourism by bad-mouthing Berkeley.

This is a college town.

If you really want to, you can arrest the guy from Sweden with the backpack sipping coffee and poring over a map trying to figure out how far Berkeley is from Santa Cruz. But there'll be another one along in an hour or so.

No matter how brutal we make our streets, how unaffordable we make our hotels and restaurants, rich property owners in Berkeley and the University of California itself would be wise to consider that having the UC campus sitting like a cat in the sun in the middle of town is an attractive nuisance worth exploiting, rather than fighting.

And it does mean listening to youth.

It may be tough for the class that commands the country club to take, but it might save Berkeley a lot of money to take a few cues from the 30,000 or so young people who would love to shop, dance, join, learn, and participate in community events if they weren't treated as such a threat by a town that can't seem to grasp that not only are they here to stay, *they have something to offer*.

It isn't just the students enrolled on campus, but the wider culture they create by just being here that will always attract travelers, hitch-hikers, poets, artists, dreamers, and people who aren't sure who they are yet but want to check out any town roaring with creativity and life.

That's us. That's us at our best, and youth culture is a big part of it. The recent push-poll that flopped as an effort to support the proposed anti-sitting law revealed some valuable input from the students who took it, who wanted more dancing, more creative events, more art events available to them.

We can do that — this town really does know how. But the people doggedly wed to the criminalization of poverty need to make a little room at the table for creative ideas. We're a college town, and with a more inclusive attitude we can thrive in every possible way. We might even learn a thing or two.

Helping Homeless Veterans in Oakland

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fered from sexual trauma in the armed forces. "They can get the therapy they need from the VA, or from a battered women's center," McElree notes. "They do come back with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), but more of them come back with sexual trauma. The government tries to hide that, but it's a pretty bad thing in the military."

The actual process of screening clients for services is fairly simple. "They have to prove that they are veterans," he says. "They have to apply for a Social Security card, they have to get a picture ID. They have to get a tuberculosis test. They can't have been discharged from the armed forces dishonorably. And then if they meet the requirements, they're in the program. I can bring someone into my housing within one hour."

For the future, he envisions "watching Operation Dignity grow to serve veterans and the homeless community in Alameda County." The outfit is in the process of "partnering with Abode in Fremont and Lifelong Medical Care here in Oakland, to do a countywide family program," he says. "Lifelong gets our people medical care really quick." Dental care can be provided for all veterans. Even non-veterans receive dental work through the organization.

Operation Dignity's transitional housing program collaborates with Swords To Plowshares' Oakland employment and training unit. Transitional housing provides a temporary home for veterans out of which they can conduct a job search and obtain job readiness.

"It is very difficult to do a job search or training while you are living on the streets," says Kenneth Crawford, who directs the Oakland unit of Swords to Plowshares employment and training program.

"I know that because I lived on the streets for two years. It's not easy to do these things, if you don't have a place to lay your head at night, take a shower, and have clean clothes. These things are important to an employer to hire you."

Approximately 60 percent of veterans who come to the Swords To Plowshares Oakland unit are classified as homeless, whether they live on the street, in shelters or in transitional housing.

One veteran who came in off the streets was referred to the vocational rehabilitation counselor who deals with issues of mental illness. The counselor felt he should seek psychological help from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. He went to the VA and was stabilized, and then returned to Swords to Plowshares.

"He wanted to be a Class A truck driver;" Crawford says. "We paid for his training. He successfully completed that training, got a Class A driver's license with full endorsements and, as we speak, is probably somewhere in Georgia, driving an 18-wheel truck, making a very decent, livable wage."

Job readiness is a major issue for many veterans. They must have been clean and sober for 60 days before they start the job programs at Swords to Plowshares. If they haven't been clean and sober for that length of time, they are referred to the VA and possibly Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Job readiness also includes punctuality, dependability, and performing well on the job. These are qualities covered by their case managers.

"We have already screened them and gone over these things with them, so that by the time they get to an interview, we know that they're able to be on time and able to perform," says Crawford. "If they do not have everything we need, we refer them to other organizations, for what they need, whether it be expungement of criminal records, legal issues such as disability upgrades, compensation plans, discharge upgrades, DMV issues."

Veterans who received a bad conduct discharge have to be served out of the San Francisco office.

Veterans write resumes and cover letters with the help of the staff. They are supplied with interview clothing, and haircuts if necessary. Before they get the first paycheck, they are given a Safeway gift card so they can get their lunches at work. After the first paycheck, they become self-sustaining.

Swords to Plowshares' employment program is now a national model. Crawford says: "I recently attended a conference in Washington, D.C., of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. I and my director presented to a group of organizations, and what we talked about is how we serve our veterans, how we set up our program for the different career tracks, like the Class A, the security guards, the green industry.

"We go to the employers and say, 'What do you need from your employees?' Get that piece in, and it's a seamless transition from training to hire. So we shared that with other organizations to better their chances with various grants that are out there. Although we are San Francisco-based, we are looked at by a large group of organizations across the U.S. as having been successful."

Veterans helping veterans is the vision of both Crawford and McElree, and the organizations they represent. Crawford shares his vision for the future of the Swords to Plowshares Employment training unit in Oakland.

"We hope to expand and add more services," he says, "which we are looking at now, to continue to build more relations here in the East Bay, link up with more referral agencies, expand our housing outreach, as well as employer outreach. We are very much looking for employers that are interested in hiring veterans. All we're asking for is opportunity for our veterans.

"My vision is to expand and grow with the hope that we can end homelessness for veterans soon. Just in my vision, my goal would be to provide more legal services, more health services. The picture is of adding more agencies into our collaboration, getting out into the community, spreading the word more, working with more transitional housing."

The work will continue as veterans keep returning to their communities from overseas wars, only to end up homeless.

"There are a lot more veterans out there." Crawford says. "My hope is to be able to drive around Alameda County and not see veterans homeless. We see about 800 veterans over a year's time. I would expect that number to increase to over 1000 by this time next year."

The Homeless Are Lonely Like Jesus

by Maureen Hartmann

Jesus was a transient teacher,
wandering around Palestine.
As human, he must have often
had to concentrate
on addressing the crowds
and healing the disabled and ill
while worrying about his next meal
and that night's shelter.
The homeless often get involved
with putting together a broken world
by involvement with peace
and justice,
and have to think of others
in the midst of their own crises.

Longing for Community Organizer Spirit

by George Wynn

2 South Side Chicago tired men
warm their hands
over flickering fire
formed on midnight street.
Older man: "Things
getting worse and worse."
Younger man nods:
"I thought things
were gonna get better."
Older man: "You know
I remember Obama
when he was
a community organizer."
"Me too."
Older man: "Damn shame!"

Oakland Protest of State Budget Cuts

from page 1

Then Jones pledged she would work with the demonstrators to do her utmost to defend the desperately needed social services that had just undergone a slash-and-burn assault from the state legislature.

"We are committed to working with the advocates," Jones said. "We are committed to working with our community-based organizations to find ways that we can find the resources necessary to keep services in place."

Jones concluded with compelling words of commitment: "These cuts are horrible, and we realize it. I'm glad you guys are here, and this is a really great, strong show of support. You just need to know that Social Services is also behind you as well!"

BOSS Executive Director boona cheema told *Street Spirit* that Jones has deep roots in the homeless advocacy community, noting that Jones had worked as an employment counselor for BOSS 25 years ago. Cheema said that with Jones as the new director, Alameda County Social Services and the Board of Supervisors are working closely with advocacy groups under the umbrella of Alameda County's Multi-Agency Task Force.

Jones wasn't the only high-ranking Social Services official to make common cause with the demonstrators. Dan Kaplan, the finance director of the Social Services Agency, also spoke in support of the protesters' goals.

"We're in a very, very rough situation here in California," Kaplan said. "We have to keep organizing and keep pushing for reform around our values as they're reflected in this budget. We don't want a minority to be able to stop us from providing the services we need."

Kaplan was referring to the minority of Republican legislators who had blocked Gov. Jerry Brown's attempt to save some social services from the chopping block. This GOP minority had prevented the efforts of a majority of state legislators to extend the sales tax at its current rate of 8.25 percent. Such an extension would have preserved many services, but GOP intransigence sealed the fate of the safety net.

Kaplan explained what that means to the poor who receive aid from CalWORKs, the state assistance program for low-income families that has suffered an estimated $3.5 billion in spending cuts since 2008.

"We're seeing an eight percent cut in CalWORKs grants and people are timed off after 48 months, instead of 60 months," Kaplan said. "We're seeing reductions in employment services. We're seeing reductions in childcare for CalWORKs clients."

All these cuts makes the plight of poor families "much, much worse," he said. Kaplan told the rally that poor people are also facing cuts in health care, education and the In Home Support Services program for the disabled and elderly.

"A minority in the legislature held up" Gov. Brown's attempt to increase revenue and preserve services by extending the sales tax, Kaplan said. "So all in all, we're making our community poorer because we cannot bear to extend taxes."

He concluded by urging the protesters to keep standing up for the rights of the poorest people in their community.

"We're in this for the long haul," Kaplan said. "We have to be saying over and over, to everyone who will listen, that this level of cutbacks is not acceptable and has to be restored. We have to push hard against the notion that a minority can put off tax extensions that a majority wants to put in place."

BOSS Director boona cheema also talked about staying committed for the long haul. "This is my 40th year of trying to stand up with people who have to live in poverty and who have challenges we cannot even believe," she said. "What they have most of all is courage and I want that courage celebrated today."

Luan Huynh *(center at podium)* introduces speakers at the rally at the Social Services building in Oakland. Lydia Gans photo

She added, "We cannot stop organizing. We must organize. Every day we've got to organize — not just the providers, not just the folks who are political. But any person who is receiving any kind of aid must organize, and must speak out about the horrors that they're living with."

A poem by BOSS community organizer Chaka-Khan Gordon, declared, "Stand with us as we create a world in which all of us live with dignity and abundance. By the power of love and unity, we begin!"

Luan Huynh supervises law students who help welfare recipients at the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC). She said, "The GOP's refusal to allow tax extensions on the ballot is a slap in the face to needy families, who have been forced to bear the brunt of the budget deficit."

In an interview with *Street Spirit*, Huynh warned of the impact of the cuts: "It's going to hit them and it's going to be really serious because the grants that our clients get now are so small that it ends up being a significant portion of their income that is cut. The grants are already so small. The average for most families on CalWORKs was $504 per month, *before* the cuts. All of that has gone down on July 1 by eight percent."

Politicians were able to justify such severe cuts because "they're only looking at it in terms of numbers and how it balances out," Huynh said. But as she works directly with poor people at EBCLC, she witnesses the human effects of the cuts.

"We're already seeing clients who are homeless," Huynh said, "and we see people who are not yet homeless but whose utilities have been shut off. When you encounter these individuals on a daily basis, you understand that these cuts are not just numbers. You're going to have people sitting in front of you with children who won't be able to go to school because now they're in shelters that are far away from the school they're attending. Or their parents have no place to prepare their meals.

"You can see the spiraling effects of all of that and I anticipate with these cuts, we'll see even more poverty."

Huynh said the Oakland protest was needed because legislators often make cuts without understanding the real damage they cause to entire families and communities.

She said, "Sometimes legislators make these decisions without understanding the hurt they cause, or without understanding that if they make these cuts, families will be homeless or children won't go to school.

"So there is a stabilizing impact that CalWORKs has on families that is really important. Part of that is being taken away by these cuts. I can't even imagine what it's like to have to live off of so little."

When an entire family must live on an average of only $504 per month, and then that small income is suddenly cut to $464 a month — as it was cut for thousands of the poorest families in the state on July 1 — it is much more than the loss of a few dollars. It can be the critical shortfall that causes a family to lose their housing.

Huynh said, "One of the important functions of public benefits is to prevent homelessness. When a family can't pay for housing, they become homeless and they're more likely to end up in emergency rooms in hospitals. For families who end up living in cars when the shelters are full, they're more subject to violence out in the street. And their children can't get continuity in their education and they suffer in moving from one school to the next."

That is very nearly a precise description of the fate that befell Ashley Proctor, a young mother with a four-year-old son. Proctor spoke out at the rally as an immediate victim of the budget cuts because she was timed off CalWORKs benefits on the day of the protest, July 1.

State legislators shortened the lifetime limit on receiving CalWORKs from 60 months to 48 months. Once you have received four years of benefits, you are "timed off" CalWORKs for the rest of your life. That is what happened to Proctor and her young son as of July 1.

She will lose all funding for school and will no longer be able to be employed in the CalWORKs work-study program, gravely jeopardizing her ability to provide for herself and her young son.

"As of today, I will be cut off from CalWORKs, and that cutoff will affect me tremendously, because I'm already halfway homeless," Proctor said. "So when they cut me off now, then I have no way to provide for my son.

"This affects everything I do. I cannot go to school. I cannot feed my son. So for them to take me off, they're taking my son off. You cannot clothe a child and give a child what he needs for just $300 a month. There is no time limit on poverty, but they're gonna time me out."

On the same day that thousands of CalWORKs recipients suffered cutbacks, thousands more disabled and elderly recipients faced major reductions in their SSI (Supplemental Security Income).

David Fobroy, a member of St. Mary's Center in Oakland, spoke out against SSI cutbacks because he is disabled and SSI is the only income he receives.

For the past three years, state officials refused to make any cost-of-living increases to SSI despite the rising cost of living, rent and food. To make matters worse, SSI was reduced on July 1 to only $830 a month — less than the federal poverty level.

"SSI is the only income I receive and it is all I have to survive," said Fobroy. "The cost of living continues to skyrocket and yet we are expected to get by with less and less."

Medi-Cal was also cut in major ways. For the first time, the poor will be charged copayments for every doctor visit, and still larger copayments for emergency room visits and short hospital stays. The legislature also imposed a cap of only seven doctor visits per year.

Ethel Long-Scott, director of the Women's Economic Agenda Project, said, "These god-awful cuts in Medi-Cal! What kind of thief is going to force the sickest, the most vulnerable population and make them pay more for health care and pay the doctors even less so it's harder to find doctors who will take people on Medi-Cal? We are one nation. We need one damn health care plan. The same one that the Congressmen got, all of us need."

Countless adults on Medi-Cal don't get dental, vision, podiatry and other needed medical care, according to Luan Huynh. "Starting two years ago, I started seeing clients in our office with rotted teeth. They say, 'I can't get a job because my teeth are rotting and no one wants to hire me.'

"But the only place I can send them is to Highland Hospital when their teeth are rotting so badly it is impacting their gums, and then as an emergency service, Highland will pull out their teeth."

LaTanya Wolf, a senior advocate at St. Mary's Center, is the mother of three and the grandmother of seven. She told the rally, "I'm here because I know what it's like to be hungry. When I became homeless and without a job, if it wasn't for St. Mary's Center, I'd be dead."

She gave the gathering an inspiring call to action — a blueprint for social change.

Wolf said, "I'm going to keep on speaking out against hunger and for housing and medical care and everything else that's been stripped from us, along with our dignity. I'm going to fight until I can't speak any more. Why can't we tax the corporations? They're not paying their taxes. They're taking everything from us until there's no more left to take. Let's take something from them and make them pay their way."

Sareena Johnson and Kali Boykin of Youth Spirit Artworks helped make the brightly painted prayer flags for the City Hall protest. Lydia Gans photo

The steps and front walk at Berkeley City Hall were transformed with scores of prayer flags, protest signs, and food served to homeless people. Lydia Gans photo

Youth Lead Protest at City Hall

"Those prayer flags are a prayer for compassion and justice for youth and all the people that are on the streets right now." — Sally Hindman, Youth Spirit Artworks

from page 1

speak to the issues.

The prayer flags are a project of Youth Spirit Artworks. Director Sally Hindman explained, "Those prayer flags are a prayer for compassion and justice for youth and all the people that are on the streets right now. (A prayer) that our community will continue to bear in mind the difficulty that they face on the street and not penalize them for being homeless."

People formed a large circle in front of City Hall to speak out against the sitting ban, with Venus Morris of Youth Spirit Artworks leading the discussion. She spoke from her own experience of young people living on the streets, alone and destitute. "So they're on the street and they're panhandling," she said. "They have nowhere to go." If they get a ticket, she added, any money they get from panhandling must go to pay the ticket — or they are sent to jail and get a criminal record.

Another speaker pointed out that Berkeley has only eight shelter beds available year-round for homeless adolescents and just 25 shelter beds open six months of the year for youth living on the streets.

Hali Hammer and Patrick Fahey played a poignant song about being homeless, "Living in a P.O. Box."

Attorney Osha Neumann read from a *Daily Cal* article quoting Roland Peterson, director of the Telegraph Business Improvement District, saying, "In my view, a sit-lie (law) is not really a threat to anyone. It's really a statement saying this is not OK, you ought to be doing something better with your life." This was met with much derision from the crowd.

Carol Denney reported on important legislation pending in Sacramento which adds homelessness to the list of groups protected under California hate crimes legislation. Assemblymember Bonnie Lowenthal from Long Beach is the sponsor of AB 312 which appears to have a good chance of passing. She sponsored an identical bill last year which passed the legislature but was vetoed by then-Gov. Schwarzenegger. The bill can bring about what Denney described as a "shift in the cultural perspective on homelessness."

As 7 p.m. approached, BOSS community organizer Michael Diehl led several people into the City Hall. Diehl was able to address the City Council, telling them how harmful this proposal would be.

But it was out on the lawn prior to the council meeting that the young people from Youth Spirit Artworks made the strongest impression. This was their event. It was their appeal for compassion, their plea for justice, expressed so beautifully with their colorful prayer flags, that carried the message.

There is more to the message. As long as Mayor Bates and the City Council consider passing an anti-sitting ordinance, the Stand Up For the Right To Sit Down coalition will continue to point out that this is not only a cruel law, but also stupid, expensive and unenforceable.

They are asking the further question: Who would benefit by such an ordinance? There is no evidence that people sitting on the sidewalks on the avenues are hurting business. It is the increasingly high commercial rents being charged that are hurting and causing so many businesses to close.

The coalition has made it clear that protests will continue until the mayor and the council abandon this repressive plan.

THIS NEWS

Poem by Mary Rudge

Editor's note: Mary Rudge and Jan Cook created a tribute to the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, a disaster of legendary horror. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the fire that killed 146 people on March 25, 1911, and helped to galvanize the U.S. labor movement. The victims were mostly young immigrant women, many of whom jumped to their death to escape the flames. Days after the fire, 100,000 mourners marched in a funeral procession while another 250,000 lined the route. Their grief built support for the right of garment workers to unionize.

Are words terrible enough, strong enough to tell this — women in a factory on fire, who burned, or jumped from windows to fall 9 stories and die — the poet worked, though words seemed as blood clots, as tears, among things that were beautiful in the room, paintings, photographs, other art and poems, the heads and hands of people — words fell from her mind as the women fell, screaming, the women who sewed the same pattern, over and over 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, 12 cents an hour, whose safety was counted as nothing — 146 died, their bodies were counted — even after 100 years, they haunt in news — the burning skin of live bodies on fire, sizzle of fat, flesh, the ache in hands that could not hold longer to the edge of a window, the agony of fear in the falling, the instant white light of blank emptiness when the brain spills from the skull's crack, the breaking of spine and fingers, the inter-tangled neural system, blood vessels, sinew, spit open, girls and women who were once solid forms in a room humming with their industry, warm with their breath, with feelings and neurons throbbing and tingling — women who shared bread they needed with others in need, the girl with beads and ribbons braided into her hair, the woman who sang songs she knew from another place to her children, the one others counted on for their happiness, who made things beautiful — for these, the poet tried to gather together words and letters that were scattered like separate bones — for women who had sold parts of their lives for passage to America — women with years of sweat and tears in the thousands of stitches they made for so few coins — the one who was 13 years old — women who had come from persecution and repression, to here and hope — those who hung from window sills by their fingertips — girls who gave their virginity to get a job — women who slept on cardboard — women with 7 children, 12 children — the one who supported a sick mother and little sisters — the one who died with the unborn child within her — the ones who held hands and fell through space together — the one who kissed her and pushed her out the window 9 stories up, then jumped, hair on fire, through the air — the many who fell into the firemen's nets then onto the sidewalk as others fell upon them and the nets broke, their fall broke through concrete — they burned and outrage changed things, fire sprinklers spring out overhead like lotus, opening — they died for unlocked doors and safe elevators and fire escapes, for unions and working conditions to become humane — the artist wants to show fair labor laws, workers' rights. justice — the poet tries again to shape words into action and truth — artists and poets together, what will our work do — and you, too, what more can we do with this news?

"Beyond the Triangle." The women were betrayed for profit. Painting by Jan Cook

"I READ THE NEWS TODAY, OH BOY!"

An exhibit of art and poetry
Benicia Public Library, 150 L St. in Benicia

The art of Jan Cook and poetry by Mary Rudge are part of an exhibit at the Benicia Library, free to the public, open all through July to a closing reading by the poets on July 28, 7-9 p.m. The show features collaborative work by artists and poets using news stories chosen as their subject.